



PROSPERO IN THE TEMPEST IS WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE HIMSELF!

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Abstract: This study has been undertaken to investigate the ever puzzling and debatable question that whether the main protagonist, Prospero, of the drama, *The Tempest* by the Bard is he himself? There are diverse views and opinions regarding the same where some critics have found Prospero to be a mouthpiece of Shakespeare while there are a whole set of people finding this similarity to be a fleeting and superficial one. The current study resolves to understand the question under certain set criteria and heads to reach to a conclusion which is valid and acceptable in general.

Index Terms: Prospero, William Shakespeare, The Tempest

INTRODUCTION:

William Shakespeare (baptised 26 April 1564 – 23 April 1616) was an English poet, playwright, and actor, who though belonged to the Elizabethan era, is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language across the continents and centuries and the Father of English drama. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon" (or simply "the Bard"). His extant works, including collaborations, consist of some 39 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and a few other verses, some of uncertain authorship. His finesse with which he touched upon the issues of societal interest without compromising the entertainment quotient of the theatre is yet unparalleled making him the most widely read and researched man of letters.

The belief that every writing piece has some reflection of the writer contained in it could never have been truer than in case of Shakespeare. His dramas are full of evidences and extracts of his belief and take on various issues of the time as well as some way ahead of his time. Though the subtlety with which he dealt them made it very difficult for the audience as well as critics to implicate them on him directly. The same goes with a very debatable question based on his supposedly last written drama, *The Tempest*. It is yet not decided upon whether the drama was a representation of his life philosophy with he himself being the protagonist, Prospero. The similarity between the two is unquestioned yet debated till date. The current study plans to look into this situation considering certain areas and aspects of both Shakespeare and Prospero's life and comparing the odds.

Similarity in the Age: The drama was written and performed around 1611 and same was the time period when Shakespeare announced his retirement from the stage. At that time, he was around 46 years old and incidentally the age of the protagonist in the drama, Prospero is also around 45 years. In Act IV Scene 1, Prospero addressed Ferdinand, his future Son-in-law as

“.....for I have given you a third of mine own life, or that for which I live:.....” (line 3-4)

It has been stated in the drama that when Prospero and his daughter Miranda reached the island, she was hardly 3 years old and they have lived on this island for 12 long years making her to be a young beautiful girl of around 15 years. Makes sense to see the similarity.

The ‘Daughter’ Connect: The drama is primarily driven by one filial bond and that is between the father Prospero and his daughter Miranda. He even says in Act I Scene 2

*“I have done nothing but in care of thee,--
Of thee, my dear one, thee, my daughter,-- (lines 19-20).*

In the same scene, he also affirms her significance in his life and his love for her by saying

*“O, a cherubim
Thou wast that did preserve me!” (lines 178-179).*

William Shakespeare left for London when his daughter Susana was 6 and Judith 4 years old. He was mostly unavailable to them physically but was driven to provide the best for them. He left ample provision in his will to see that his daughters inherit well. It is also believed that after his retirement to New Place, he wanted to rejuvenate his ties with his daughters as his only son Hamnet was long dead.

Minimum reference to the wife: Incidentally the relationship which the protagonist might have had with his wife and the relationship Shakespeare shared with his wife Anne are both referred minimally. There is no valid evidence in any document which could prove whether his bond with his wife was affectionate or indifferent! He barely and only once mentions her in his will towards the end bequeathing her ‘the second-best bed’. Likewise, Prospero also mentioned his wife only once in the drama while narrating his tale to his daughter in Act I Scene 2

*“Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and
She said thou wast my daughter;..” (lines 67-68)*

Not to forget the fact mentioned in the same scene where he admits that he loved his brother, Antonio, the most after his love for his daughter

*“.....—he, whom next thyself
Of all the world I loved,....” (lines 82-83)*

Apparently it raises the question in the drama about his love for his wife, thus, making it seem similar like the dramatist himself.

Love for their Art: It goes without saying that Shakespeare was very passionate about his art and saw the shining progress very soon in his career only because of this passionate dedication and involvement in his craft. Someone who might have moved to London somewhere around 1590 bought the second largest house in town, New Place in 1597. All this because of his fame and glory of his art- his theatre. Prospero, too, clearly admits that he was least interested in his dukedom and prized his library and his love for his liberal art much above everything else. In act I Scene 2 while addressing Miranda, he says

*“.....and for the liberal arts
Without a parallel; those being all my study,
The government I cast upon my brother,...” (lines 87-89)*

While narrating the tale of injustice meted out to him at the hands of his younger brother, in the same scene, he also admits that he was too involved in his study and ignored all else:

*“ I, thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated
To closeness and the bettering of my mind...” (lines 105-106)*

It has been observed by many Biographers that the Bard was broadly read and that he continued to absorb knowledge from diverse publications until his death. Also, in the same scene while being grateful to the help being provided by Gonzalo, he again admits that to him all that mattered was his love for his books and his art

*“Knowing I loved my books, he furnished me
From mine own library with volumes that*

I prize above my dukedom.” (lines 193-195)

This similarity of both Prospero and Shakespeare being passionately involved about their art, both perfecting it to the glory and success of all times cannot be just chance happening!

Creation of Vision/ Characters/Plots: It is apparently impossible to not be able to see the metaphorical similarity in the way Shakespeare created his dramatic pieces and the way Prospero creates visions, moves his characters and plans the course of events. Emma Smith’s lecture on ‘Coleridge’s famous Essay on *The Tempest*’ states that Coleridge also calls Prospero *“the very Shakespeare himself, as it were, of The Tempest”*. In the way that Prospero was able to manipulate the world around him, perhaps it could be interpreted as Shakespeare manipulating the English language through several means. Watching Prospero work through *The Tempest* is like watching the dramatist create his play, building a story from material at hand and developing his plot so that the resolution brings the world into line with his idea of goodness and justice. In fact, Prospero uses his magic to manipulate and befuddle just like Shakespeare uses his craft to create scenes par excellence.

Control and Authority: Prospero stands as a worthy symbol to Shakespeare in a way that Prospero manipulates and controls everything around him. He monitors everything that happens onstage and otherwise and is even able to control the natural forces of the island. Shakespeare’s role was multidimensional as a playwright, director, producer etc. mostly staying in the background yet keeping the strings in his hand. Likewise, Prospero remains in the background or invisible and assigns the tasks to Ariel and his spirits until the very last scene where he appears in front of all the characters. Just like the dramatist assesses and appreciates the performance of his actors similarly does Prospero by appreciating Ariel and his ministers in Act III scene 3 for putting up a good act at banquet

*“Bravely the figure of this harpy hast thou
Perform’d my Ariel;..... my meaner ministers
Their several kinds have done.” (lines 95-100)*

Shakespeare’s plays were performed on an outdoor stage without lighting. Starting in the early afternoon, they had to be completed before sundown which incidentally is also the time period of the drama as stated by Prospero in Act I Scene 2

*“At least two glasses. The time ‘twixt six and now
Must by us both be spent most preciouslly.” (lines 280-281)*

The reminder of the same happens by Ariel at the last in Act V Scene 1 when he says

*“On the sixth hour; at which time, my lord,
You said our work should cease.” (lines 4-5)*

Impending Retirement vs Going Back to Naples: While reading *The Tempest*, it is almost impossible not to note that both Prospero and Shakespeare seem to be willing to voluntarily give up their power and leave the stage peacefully. Prospero had lived and perfected his art on the island for the last twelve years, but he had always yearned to go back to Milan because that is where he belongs. Similarly, Shakespeare had lived and perfected his craft in London, achieved mastery there but he too wants to go back to his native place to rejuvenate his ties with his people. Prospero’s summing up all the actions within four hours of the day narrates his desire to bring about a closure to all the planning, plotting and scheming done by the conspirators and him as well. Unusually for Shakespeare, a strict maintenance of the three Unities, a considerably simpler storyline with no complications in the sub-plot and smooth structure is reflective of him summing up all his work and bring it to a full circle.

Masque Scene/ Epilogue as Farewell Speech of Shakespeare: Act IV Scene 1 which is popularly called as Masque scene has many apparent evidences equating Prospero with the Bard of Avon. At the abrupt end of the masque when Prospero addresses a confused Ferdinand, he says

“Our revels now are ended....” (line 133)

Theatrically this line meant that their merry making/celebrations had come to an end but to an inquisitive soul it might also mean that Shakespeare is hinting towards the end of his career as a playwright/actor/producer/Director etc. In the same context he talks about the disappearance of the actors and other paraphernalia as well

“..... *These our actors,*

.....

Are melted into air, into thin air:

.....

The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,

The solemn temples, the great globe itself,

Yea, all which it inherit..... (lines 133-139)

It is crystal clear that Prospero here is the mouthpiece of the dramatist giving his farewell speech. It can also be taken as Shakespeare's attempt to signal towards concept of theatre where there is a Prospero- like playwright-director who can fashion pageants out of thin air for the pleasure and entertainment of the audience- another kind of art.

Also is to be noted the idea that Prospero in his Epilogue claims his

“charms are all o'erthrown” (line 1).

This can very well be taken as Shakespeare relinquishing his masterful writing and dominance of contemporary literature. Following it is the next line in which Prospero explains that

“what strength I have's mine own”(line 2)

It is significant that Prospero says this to claim that he has completely given up his supernatural abilities but when applied to Shakespeare, it becomes apparent that he is saying that his life is now bereft of any more substantial writing. Hence, these two lines represent Shakespeare giving up the mantle of the greatest contemporary playwright and opening the way for future authors. Additionally, hearing Prospero asking his audience

“But release me from my bands

With the help of your good hands:” (lines 9-10)

These two lines create an interesting bond between Prospero and Shakespeare where the protagonist is asking the audience to set him free by their applause which will break all the magic spell. Incidentally, Shakespeare here is appreciating his audience that they gave him an ability and chance to produce such work and now is the time that they should bid him adieu in a similar manner. Moreover, when he says,

“..... or else my project fails,

Which was to please:.....”(lines 12-13)

It is not merely Prospero talking about his reclamation of his dukedom rather it is Shakespeare bidding adieu to his audience with humility proclaiming that all he did was just to entertain them and nothing else. In the final lines of the epilogue and the drama, Prospero seems to be referring to Lord's prayer where he admits that he is all too human who deserves to be forgiven for his faults, sins and offences. It is highly unlikely to not be able to decipher the connect it has with Shakespeare's final words as far as his experiments with plot/ themes and characters are concerned where he might have upset society and hence rightfully demands their forgiveness.

The current study is concluded by quoting per se:

Writing in 1875, Edward Dowden said: "We identify Prospero in some measure with Shakespeare himself ... because the temper of Prospero, the grave harmony of his character, his self-mastery, his calm validity of will ... and with these, a certain abandonment, a remoteness from the common joys and sorrows of the world, are characteristic of Shakespeare as discovered to us in all his latest plays."

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